



Cities Afraid of Death By Congestion

By Larry Copeland

Extra-wide freeways are

among ideas to keep traffic

-- and local economies -- moving smoothly in future

A plan to widen part of Interstate 10 in metropolitan Phoenix from 14 lanes to 24 is the USA's latest giant superhighway proposal designed to ease the kind of gridlock that some planners say could stunt economic growth.

For a 2-mile stretch between U.S. 60 in Tempe and State Route 143, the interstate would have six general-purpose lanes, two carpool lanes and four lanes for local traffic in each direction. Work on the first phase, which planners expect to cost about \$550 million, could begin by 2011.

Political and business leaders in metro areas increasingly view traffic congestion as hurting their ability to compete with other regions for new businesses and young professionals. "There's no question that traffic is a major factor for a business that's contemplating moving to Atlanta," says David Gill, an Atlanta bank president who heads a business group pushing for new ways to finance transportation projects in Georgia.

The superwide highway in Phoenix will cut dangerous weaving at interchanges, reduce freeway congestion and add capacity for a booming population, planners say.

"The Phoenix metro area is growing like crazy," says Eric Anderson, transportation director for the Maricopa Association of Governments, the regional planning agency that coordinates freeway construction projects. "We're adding about 125,000 people a year, and we have a population approaching 4 million."

The section of I-10 proposed for widening now carries about 294,000 vehicles a day. That will jump to a projected 450,000 by 2025, says Arizona Department of Transportation spokesman Doug Nintzel.

In addition to the 2 miles of I-10 that will be 24 lanes wide, an additional 12 miles ultimately will average 22 lanes.

More big projects

An interstate highway wider than the length of a football field is not as rare as it was 10 years ago, when the El Toro interchange of Interstates 5 and 405 in Orange County, Calif., opened with 26 lanes. If approved, Arizona's I-10 widening, which will be studied for about two more years, would join such recent or planned 18-plus lane projects as:

*"The Mixing Bowl" in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. This interchange of Interstates 95, 395 and 495 is one of the busiest on the East Coast.

*The Katy Freeway, a stretch of I-10 from the Houston suburb of Katy to downtown. It's being widened to nine lanes in each direction.

*A public-private plan to widen a stretch of Interstate 75 north of Atlanta to 23 lanes. Work could begin in 2008.

"These are really very big bottleneck-improvement projects," says David Schrank, a researcher at the Texas Transportation Institute. "When these highways were designed and built decades ago, the traffic that's there today could hardly be foreseen. A lot of these interstates designed and built in the '50s, '60s and '70s are needing a modernization. ... That's happening nationwide."

Transit advocates say the best transportation plans include elements beyond highways. "We ought to be moving in some new directions," says Anne Canby, president of the Surface Transportation Policy Partnership, which promotes alternatives to people driving by themselves.

Worries in Atlanta

Traffic congestion in Atlanta has long been a headache. But the high-tech communications networks spawned by the 1996 Olympics, the abundant supply of college-educated workers and the mild climate have helped the metro area remain a magnet for new businesses.

Now, though, Atlanta's traffic is the fourth-worst in the nation, behind only Los Angeles', Washington's and San Francisco's, according to the Texas Transportation Institute.

Atlanta's boosters say that unless drastic steps are taken to unclog the highways here, the city won't be able to compete with fast-growing places such as Phoenix, Denver, San Diego, Charlotte and Dallas -- all of which have made long-term commitments to major transportation improvements.

"We've got the things businesses need," Gill says. "We have great momentum, a great communications infrastructure, the second-highest number of college-educated residents in the country. But when someone comes here and they're sitting in traffic, they don't see that. We've got to deal with this if we're going to stay competitive."

Gill is president of the Regional Business Coalition, a group of 14 metro area chambers of commerce that is supporting a state House bill that would allow two or more counties to form a regional partnership and ask voters to approve local taxes for local road and transit projects.

Since 2000, voters in 33 states have approved about 70% of the transportation ballot measures put before them; about 40% of those initiatives included a sales tax, says Jason Jordan, program director for the Center for Transportation Excellence, a non-partisan policy research center.

"The funding mechanisms (for transportation) are getting more diverse every day," Schrank says.

Progress sometimes slow

As he plans Phoenix's project to add 10 lanes on I-10, Anderson must deal with the interests of one county, 25 incorporated cities and towns and three Native American communities.

Atlanta's traffic planners would love to be in his shoes.

"We have 164 units of government in the area," says Sam Williams, president of the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce. "Trying to get that many elected officials to sit down and agree on just about anything is so complex politically."

State Rep. Chuck Martin, a Republican from Alpharetta, an Atlanta suburb, introduced the Georgia funding bill last month. Martin and other supporters of the measure say they are acting with a sense of urgency.

It's not just for the sake of business competition, either. A recent study for the metro chamber of commerce found that Atlanta is one of the most favored destinations of educated young professionals. But transportation mobility is high on their list of desirable traits in the cities where they live.

The chamber had a grim postscript: Atlanta's traffic will become the nation's second-worst by 2020 if congestion is not reduced. (c) Copyright 2005 USA TODAY, a division of Gannett Co. Inc.

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